

## **Experiential Learning and its Role in Training and Improved Practice in High Level Sports Officiating**

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### *Abstract*

*This qualitative study investigated how high level sports officials engage in experiential learning to improve their practice. Adult learning occurs in formal, nonformal and informal environments, and in some cases it is difficult to differentiate between these settings. In the case of cycling officials, learning begins in a nonformal environment during training sessions, but it is during the race event itself, in an informal environment, that learning is solidified and occurs in real time. Nine officials, whose training and education must be applied in a dynamic, intense environment, participated in a focus group interview where they explored how their experiences surrounding the race impact learning. Findings reveal how this adult learning theory is manifested through reflective practice, and how interaction with others plays a role in the learning process.*

Opportunities for learning are everywhere, a constant aspect of daily life. The word *learning* is frequently associated with educational institutions that offer degrees and credit, which, according to Coombs, Prosser, and Ahmed's (1973) typology of educational settings, would be considered *formal* education. However, attitude, knowledge and skill acquisition occur most often outside of formal environments. The education sports officials participate in would be considered *nonformal* because even though it is an organized learning activity and involves prescribed learning objectives, it is offered through a community-based organization and institution whose mission is something other than education. In reality, the meaningful and significant learning officials experience arguably takes place through *informal* learning. Informal, or incidental, learning is that which happens naturally, through the activities in everyday life. Informal learning occurs in the activities surrounding or during an experience, or in this case a sporting event, thus solidifying the learning that takes place during education and training sessions. It is sometimes difficult to differentiate between these three settings because of the overlap between them. The goal of this study was to explore the ways high level sports officials who officiate bicycle races advance their knowledge and skills through experiential learning, nonformal and informal education, and interaction with one another.

### *Experiential Learning*

Like other theories of adult learning, experiential learning encompasses various dimensions and theoretical conceptualizations (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). As Merriam and

Brockett (2007) put it, “The idea of experience as a core aspect of adult learning is so pervasive in the theory and practice of adult education that it would be difficult to find examples that do not address the role of experience” (p. 15). Written about extensively by researchers in a number of fields, experiential learning has been studied as a pedagogical approach and an instructional strategy in formal education, most often by those who explore how experiential learning is infused into university coursework. Adult learning scholars, on the other hand, focus more on the experience people bring to the learning environment and how that experience might advance or in some cases, thwart the attainment of new knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Training and development programs in the workplace also embed experiential learning activities into curriculum to build on the expertise of participants and make learning more relevant to their jobs.

Generally, the role of experience and its relationship to education is the point of conversations surrounding this concept. Dewey (1938) was a pioneer in the discussion of how the two are inextricably linked. In his succinct book, *Experience and Education*, his attention rests on children and two types of education: traditional, and what he calls “new” (progressive) education. The former, traditional education represents an environment where the student is a passive learner in a rigid system of predetermined information and rules bound by culture and history. Progressive education, which he claims is not necessarily superior to traditional education, allows students the opportunity for individual expression and learning through experience. Dewey advocated for the inclusion of experience, but it must be experience that promotes growth and development and moves the learner forward, and the environment must be created to allow for this growth.

Lindeman (1961), who was a contemporary of Dewey’s and concentrated specifically on adults and their learning, wrote that analyzing personal experience is the core method of adult education. Knowles (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2011), following in Lindeman’s footsteps, was especially interested in the idea of experience as the key resource in adults’ learning. He established the learner’s prior experiences as one of six core learning principles in his *Andragogy in Practice* model. He believed it is the quality and quantity of their life experiences that set them apart from children and youth and inform how they learn. He claimed that these differences should be capitalized on by the adult educator and used to individualize education to maximize learning.

Several models of experiential learning have gained the attention of students and scholars seeking to advance their understanding of the role of experience in adult education, work, and life settings. Jarvis (2006), Tennent and Podgson (1995), Fenwick (2003), and Usher and Bryant (1997) all offer experiential paradigms that frame learning. Kolb’s *Experiential Learning Cycle* (1984) is one of the most cited in the literature on this topic. It involves four stages that learners navigate during the learning process: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. To be an effective learner, each stage requires the learner to possess different abilities, ranging from openness to new experiences, to observational and analytical skills, to problem-solving skills that allow the learner to execute new concepts in practice. The cycle might be entered from any of the four stages but Kolb emphasized that they occur in sequence. The overarching idea is that a person experiences an action and then considers the impact of the action in a situation.

Boud, Keogh, and Walker's (1985) model emphasizes reflection-on-action as part of the learning process. They explain that to learn from an experience, it must be purposefully considered during each of three stages: Returning to experience, attending to (or connecting with) feelings, and evaluating experience. Reflection, according to Boud et al., is a process in which "individuals engage to explore their experiences in order to lead to new understandings and appreciations" (p. 19). The key here is that in addition to thinking, emotion is considered, as emotions also have a role to play in learning. Boud's more recent work (Boud & Miller, 1996) also considers the context (social, political, technical) in which learning occurs, and how one person's experiences promote the learning of others.

### *Literature Review*

Much of the recent literature focuses on experiential learning as part of the curriculum design in formal education, and higher education in particular. Creating experiences where students apply concepts learned in the classroom to real-world settings is an instructional technique adopted by many programs. The idea is to promote student learning outside of the classroom. For example, Wolske, Rhinesmith, and Kumar (2014) describe how a form of experiential learning they titled studio-based learning (SBL) supported "enculturation" into their field, library and information science (p. 166). The authors sought to understand whether their program served as a model for experiential learning by providing students the opportunity to participate in real-world design projects. Students perceived the studio courses allowed them to apply what they were learning in the classroom to the setting in which they might eventually be employed.

In another investigation (Moody, Kostohryz & Vereen, 2014), the focus was on master's level students' engagement in the co-facilitation and observation of small group sessions in a counselor education program. The authors studied how students experience integrating new knowledge related to leadership into live supervision during course preparation for careers in professional counseling. These counselors-in-training perceived that full engagement by the individuals participating in the project, including supervisors and student peers, led to their learning. Prolonged engagement during multiple interactions with faculty, as well as receiving feedback in real-time, impacted students' experiences through development of insight and awareness of their performance.

Hodge et al. (2011) found that students' reflection on their identity and positionality came about through exposure to institutional and workplace contexts. Their research on experiential and situated learning activities at three Australian universities focused on how people learn. Interviews conducted with participants including students, staff, and hosts led to several conclusions about their involvement in internships, student placements, and project-based fieldwork. One major finding was that students experienced transformations of sorts just by reflecting on their experiences and by being on site and in a particular place or location related to their career.

Service learning, another vehicle through which experiential learning occurs, was required of students in a university public speaking class offered specifically for Latina/o students (Colvin & Tobler, 2013). Students delivered speeches to elementary and middle school students whom they were also mentoring as another aspect of service learning requirements for the course. In

this context, participants applied learning to the real-world, and benefitted from sharing their experiences with fellow students in the course.

Research related to experiential learning that occurs in nonformal and incidental education is less prevalent. Teng and Yusof (2014) provide a glimpse of how learning transpired for women who survived the Tsunami in Aceh. More women lost their lives than men as a result of the event and those who survived often lost their livelihood and found themselves caring for others who were impacted by the devastation. In this context, they experienced learning during times of reflection on their beliefs, their values and their assumptions, through talking with others who shared their experience, and by “acknowledging and using feelings”, and building an awareness of those feelings to help them cope with their life situation (p. 24).

Medical education and professional development within healthcare is another area that has adopted strategies that encourage learning during practice or in context. For example, one study sought to determine whether exposure to patients in a primary healthcare community clinic would result in attitudinal change in first-year medical students. Beylefeld (2014) concluded that properly structured learning activities in the field can do two things. One, they can help students understand content in new ways, and two, they have the power to foster self-reflection that impacts how students will ultimately function in their profession. Catangui and Roberts (2014) investigated how nurses working in a hyper-acute stroke unit experienced learning regarding the delivery of one particular treatment approach for which most had no formal training. Participants found that during the experience, the support of senior nurses and stroke doctors was an important factor in their development of confidence and competence.

### *Methods*

The current investigation employed a basic qualitative descriptive design to explore the ways experiential learning is manifested in high level sports officiating. Permission was obtained from the institutional review board (IRB) prior to commencing with the study. A focus group interview was selected as the technique of data collection because of the exploratory nature of the study, allowing the researcher the opportunity to amass a broad range of responses and varying perspectives from participants. The focus group interview allows participants to hear others' responses and build on those or offer alternative views. Marshall and Rossman (1999) point out that focus groups are socially oriented, and because this study explored the experience of learning, working and interacting with others, this method of data collection was deemed appropriate. “This method assumes that an individual's attitudes and beliefs do not form in a vacuum: People often need to listen to others' opinions and understandings in order to form their own” (p. 115).

### *Participants*

Participants were licensed officials from USA Cycling who were attending a summit held every other year by the organization. Officials from around the United States attend the event, which is intended as a professional development opportunity and features seminars on current issues such as continuing education programs, best practices for recruiting and rewarding officials in local associations, leadership during races, and officials' code of ethics. While the summit is attended

primarily by more experienced officials in the upper levels of the sport, some junior officials do take part.

Prior to the summit, an email was sent to all registered summit participants describing the nature of the research and inviting them to be part of the focus group. A follow-up email was sent to those who expressed an interest and included details regarding logistics of the meeting, a more detailed description of the purpose of the study, as well as an informed consent form detailing the voluntary nature of participation and the steps that would be taken to protect their confidentiality. A demographic questionnaire was also sent to participants and included questions regarding the official's age, the number of races they had worked, and their level of formal education. Three open-ended questions were included, asking participants to describe the formal and informal training they had received as an official, as well as how their most valuable learning experiences occurred. Officials had the option to return the form electronically or to return it to the researcher in person prior to the interview.

Nine officials, four males and five females who ranged in age from 41-65, participated in the focus group. In terms of category, several were licensed in more than one area (i.e. road, mountain bike) and were categorized at different levels in each discipline. For the purpose of this study their highest ranking is used: International Commissaire (n=1); National Commissaire (n=2); Category A (n=4); Category B (n=1); Category C (n=1). Between them they have officiated over 2500 races. Four of the officials hold master's degrees, four have their bachelor's degree, and one holds an associate's degree.

### *Focus Group Discussion*

A semi-structured, open-ended focus group interview protocol was used to explore the overall research question framing the study. The interview was audiotaped and transcribed, and notes were taken throughout. Specifically, officials were asked about the relationship between the formal training they receive and learning that occurs during the execution of their job. Additionally, they were asked about the role of reflection in their learning, and how their experiences help them improve their practice.

### *Data Analysis*

The strategy used to examine the data collected during the focus group interview was content analysis. As a first step, the audio recording of the interview, the interview transcript and observation notes were reviewed and notes were made to "develop tentative ideas about categories and relationships" present in the data (Maxwell, 2013, p. 105). Open coding, as explained by Strauss and Corbin (2007), involves developing coding strategies based on what significant ideas emerge in the data. In this case, to help order the data, perceptions of how learning transpired were coded and grouped into broader themes that encapsulated the participants' experiences. These themes were then analyzed for meaning to make sense of the data.

### Findings

There was consensus among this group of cycling officials that while learning to carry out their job may begin in a formal classroom, the real learning takes place in the field, in an authentic environment. Three recurrent themes materialized from the analysis of the focus group interview transcripts: How learning occurs on the job, or during the race itself, the value of reflection for learning, and how learning from others helped officials improve their own practice. These are discussed below.

#### *On-the-Job Training: From the Clinic to the Race Course*

Entry-level officials begin their education and training in a clinic where they first learn the rules and regulations of bicycle racing. Local associations, which vary in size and scope, offer the training, and in order to obtain their license new officials must take the course and pass a test that assesses their knowledge of the rules. Once licensed, officials are assigned to work a race, often as an apprentice; there is no formal apprenticeship or applied training but some local associations do attempt to provide newly licensed officials with some experience working a race before they take on a formal role on the crew. Those who want to advance their careers and seek promotion to a higher category take specific courses toward the next level and must show evidence of their officiating experience.

Participants shared how during entry-level clinics they learn the rules and discuss various scenarios illustrating how the rules are applied during the race, but they believe learning to officiate actually occurs on the job. According to one official, *“There are the hard and fast rules, but a lot of the judgment calls you make are the things that you really can’t train for”*. Another participant added that:

*We seriously teach to the test, because all the test is, is ‘congratulations, you have a license’, just like your pilot’s license and your motorcycle license. Now, you have the license to go out and learn how to be an official. Now you have a license to go and learn how to score a race, officiate a race.*

When discussing the impact a race has in relation to the learning that occurs during the clinic, one official stated:

*It solidifies it. I feel like the in-class, taking the clinic stuff, it’s a lot of different ideas milling around, but once you get into a situation where you have to pick one of those and apply it, you can tie all of those together into a more cohesive concept or idea for application.*

The race environment is dynamic; bicycles are moving objects so the race situation and the environment change continuously and quickly. Safety concerns are just one factor that makes officiating a bicycle race intense. Just as important is the fact that races are typically held outdoors where weather and logistics can make an impact. Additionally, “on-the-spot”, split-second decision-making by an official is part of the job and is required for them to be effective. In this context, no matter their experience, officials must “think on their feet” and apply the rules

and procedures they learned during formal training in real-time. One participant portrayed this as “*Going from the black and white of the rulebook to the unbelievably many shades of gray*”. As a group, participants agreed that it is during the race event itself that meaningful learning occurs. The following exchange further illustrates participants’ perceptions of where and how learning takes place:

*There is no book.*

*That is not classroom. [The] classroom is the race course.*

*Your best classroom is going to races.*

*There’s always going to be something that comes up that’s not covered in the book and you just have to take that leap.*

*Nobody has trained you for that. No rulebook has trained you for that.*

### *Reflection as a Learning Device for Improved Practice*

Officials commonly engage in the practice of reflecting on the race, specifically on their own performance and decisions they made. Bicycle races can be single or multi-day events. During a multi-day event standard practice is for officials to meet as a group immediately following each race to debrief and discuss things that went well and areas that need improvement. Debriefing sessions are usually led by the chief referee. On the individual level, reflection often transpires on the official’s drive home or in the days just after the event, helping them make sense of the experience. They also reach out to other officials to deliberate together on how they handled particular situations during the race.

*Sometimes I’ll pick up the phone and call another official and say, ‘here’s what happened. Did I really screw this up?’ there’s almost always someone who’s willing to talk me down, talk me through it. Yeah, my in the car conversations are frequently – sometimes it’s me for a while inside my head, but often within a day or two I will have reached out to somebody and say, ‘here’s what happened; what should I have done? Here’s what I did.’ Usually what I get is, ‘yeah, that was OK; here’s another idea.’*

Participants questioned whether or not they are able to actually contemplate decisions that need to be made in the moment because of the fast-paced nature of the race and the lack of time they have to ponder past decisions and experiences and how those should impact their course of action now. As one official put it, “*Nine times out of ten, there’s no time for that*”. Another observed that the “*decision has to happen now, not wait a minute; what happened three weeks ago?*”. After some discourse, they decided that in fact they likely *do* reflect on actions and learning experiences in the moment, but may not be aware of it at the time, as illustrated by the discussion below:

*I think all of us, and especially if we’re the chief of a race, we’re running through scenarios in our heads the entire event of what if this, what if that, what if the other. You see this happening; what if this happens from that? You’re almost preparing for the decision before the incident even happens.*

*It’s not a conscious thought; it’s a subconscious thought.*

*You've seen that before or something like that, and you're also able to prioritize what the outcome is supposed to be, based on those previous situations. You say, last time I did this it didn't work out, so maybe I'd better adjust. I think a lot of that reflection in action happens and we don't realize it until we reflect on the action later.*

A related area that generated dialogue during the interview was learning from mistakes. Newer officials admitted to struggling with their performance, especially any decisions that affected the outcome of a race. More experienced officials shared how they, too, ruminated over their judgment calls and how they handled difficult circumstances. The participants agreed that it was important to learn from the mistake and move on, as one stated, "...if you've learned from it".

*For me personally, I learn the most from the mistakes I made, because the bigger the screw-up, the bigger the lesson.*

*It's like people have said before, you learn a lot from your mistakes, but you also learn a lot from things that go really well. If you handle a situation that comes out just like you wanted it, presented with it again in the future, you know what to do. You have the confidence to do it again because it worked so well. You can learn both ways, from both the good and the bad.*

*Even at a certain point...you just have to let it go. You can agonize over it, you can think about. What should I have done? What shouldn't I have done? But even when you blow it, you're human; you've got to let it go.*

### *Learning from the Experiences of Others*

Officials working bike races learn to adapt to the makeup of the crew. The composition of the crew may change from race to race and year to year, especially for those working larger, more prestigious events. More experienced officials working at both local and national levels are accustomed to operating alongside others with whom they may have never worked or perhaps even met. Whether they are officiating at the local or national level, they are assigned a role, and they execute and adapt as necessary. Those advancing to the higher levels of the sport attend training sessions with other officials from around the country. Races and clinics offer opportunities to recall experiences and discuss ways they have handled tough situations.

Participants shared how significant learning comes from this personal interaction, from hearing about others' experiences as well as from sharing their own. As one participant put it, "*I've always found that I learned the most, even in the formal classes, from the war stories.*" Officials perceive that the exchanges that take place informally serve as a vehicle for learning that is more valuable than learning via written curriculum in the classroom or clinic environment. Said one participant:

*The most recent one I took is the cycle cross international class. It was people from various areas and everyone talking about how this is what we've seen. I always personally get a lot more from that than I do from the written presentation and the books. Yes, that's important, knowing the rules, but knowing how people apply those rules.*



Reflecting on and communicating their own experiences is another way they learn. According to one official:

*...we have the tradition at national-level events, we all get together and swap war stories, not just from that event but from other events as well. Same thing – [as] you're reflecting on a previous action and sometimes even telling the story you suddenly get a different idea about it, having seen other people's reactions to it and other people telling their stories. There's really a lot to be gained from that reflection.*

Another commented on those who do not participate in these exchanges:

*I think a lot of people discount that and don't take that into account. Some officials, when we have those bull sessions, they don't want to mess with them and they'll go off on their own, and I think that's a big mistake because you really can learn a lot from each other from that reflection and talking about it.*

Through working with one another, through mentoring, and through being mentored, officials learned to listen to and learn from the narratives of less experienced and more seasoned officials alike. One participant summed it up with, *I try to soak up all I can from people who know more than I do.* Another responded by saying, *Everyone can teach you something.*

### Discussion

The findings from this study offer evidence that in some contexts, significant learning occurs primarily when content knowledge is applied in real-world situations. Features or elements of many adult learning theories and models may characterize any one learning experience, but some describe the phenomenon in question better than others. In this case, the theory of experiential learning seems to appropriately represent that which occurs with high level bicycle race officials.

Participants shared that the learning necessary to be an official occurs on the job. The training they undergo prior to working a race acquaints them with the rules and regulations established by the organization. During the race itself they actually learn the procedural aspects of managing the event and they practice the skills associated with their position. They perceive this as on-the-job training because it is difficult, if not impossible, to really learn to officiate in a classroom environment. Learning occurs as a direct result of participation in the experience of officiating.

Rules and procedures can be introduced in a classroom, but an event like a bicycle race cannot be effectively simulated in a static environment; actual learning takes place before, during and after the race event itself. During the experience officials learn to apply rules, they learn ways to handle complex situations, and they learn how to make decisions based on a changing environment.

Donald Schon (1983; 1987) alleged that the most beneficial learning occurs in practice. His work with organizational learning and reflective practice are very relevant to the current study. Reflective practice is characterized by two models closely related to experiential learning: reflection-on-action and reflection-in-action. Reflection-in-action occurs when a person is able

to “think on their feet” while “in the midst of their performance” (Schon, 1983, p. 54) and adjust as necessary. Boud, Keogh, and Walker (1985) maintain that experiences become vehicles for learning when a person reflects on their action, is able to recollect, to walk back through an experience and evaluate all aspects of it. Officials’ remarks and observations about their own behavior and learning support these models. They recognized how they were able to make decisions in the moment based on past experiences, and they acknowledged how reflecting on certain events allowed them to process and make sense of them.

While not the focus of the current study, the conversations among these officials during the focus group support another model associated with experiential learning, communities of practice. Officials discussed how they learned from the narratives and experiences of others, from sharing information and seeking advice. “Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly” (Wenger, n.d., para. 4). They form when the group engages in mutual knowing and learning and provide opportunities, often informally, for members to increase competence. In this case, the collective learning is not necessarily intentional, but is the outcome of the interaction between officials. Members of a community of practice “develop a shared repertoire of resources: experiences, stories, tools, ways of addressing recurring problems—in short a shared practice” (Wenger, n.d., para. 9). This model aligns well with officials’ descriptions of learning from other officials’ experiences.

### *Implications for Educators*

Experiential learning is characterized differently depending on the various model or theorist, and the ways educators encourage or make use of this type of learning for the benefit of the student changes based on their perspective and the setting. For example, programs in many degree-granting institutions including higher education, career and technical education, and vocational and trade schools emphasize authentic learning activities that require students to apply information and skills in a real-world setting. Some programs require internships or service-learning as part of program design so students are better equipped to enter the workforce. Here, experiential learning is used as a pedagogical technique. Facilitators in adult education settings, who often champion Knowles’ (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson (2011) core principles of adult learning, may approach experiential learning a bit differently. They encourage students in programs such as adult basic education (ABE) and GED preparatory courses to use their prior experiences as a resource for learning. Both of these examples are associated with learning in formal institutions.

Rich opportunities for using experiential learning to promote knowledge and skill acquisition reside in nonformal and informal contexts such as community education as well, and this is where many adults are learning. However, educators in settings outside of formal education may or may not engage in or even be aware of specific practices advocated by theorists like Lindeman and Knowles that embrace a learner’s prior experiences or place them in contexts where learning is more likely to occur. According to Boud and Walker (1990):

Most learning takes place outside of organised educational settings. Such experience is typically haphazard and unplanned, and difficult or impossible for the learner and those facilitating learning to control. One of the questions that arise from this observation is what can we do to enhance the possibility of learning occurring in any given situation? (p. 61)

The challenge lies with finding ways to integrate real-world learning experiences or techniques that encourage learners to call upon prior work and life experience into nonformal education. The concept of experiential learning may appear to be a simple one, but implementation may only occur when the facilitator is familiar with the theory.

Programs that cater to adults should consider the importance of using adult learning theory and models such as experiential learning to enhance student learning and make content more relevant to their lives. It would be worthwhile to take a deeper look into how learning in context, reflective practice and communities of practice advance lifelong learning in the context of leisure, the home, the workplace, and the community. Future research should examine how this is taking place in nonformal and informal environments.

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